

# What Leaders Read 2

Key texts from education and beyond

**Full Report** | Autumn 2003

PHOTO REDACTED DUE TO THIRD PARTY RIGHTS OR OTHER LEGAL ISSUES

A review of literature carried out for  
NCSL by **Mel West, Mel Ainscow** and  
**Helen Notman** of the University of  
Manchester



National College for School Leadership

## **Contents**

Introduction	2
Using ideas from the literature to move leadership practice forward	3
What kinds of school leadership are needed?	3
What does the mainstream literature suggest about leadership?	6
What is it that school leaders do?	8
How can ideas from the literature be used to develop practice?	9
How are the reviews framed?	12
References	13

## Introduction

When we began this study, what both ourselves and the National College for School Leadership (NCSL) had in mind was a conventional review of writings about leadership in educational settings. However, as we began to gather materials and to talk with colleagues, both here at the University of Manchester in the Business School and the Faculty of Education, and from the field, drawing on the experience of the trainers and programme members in the University's Centre for Educational Leadership, we began to wonder how useful another survey of theories and approaches would be to those wrestling daily with the problems and priorities confronting school leaders.

In our conversations with headteachers, we learned that they seldom read academic reviews, and, when they did, this was more likely to be associated with the writing requirements of a Master's course than a desire to keep abreast of theoretical arguments. However, the majority could point to two or three books on leadership that had influenced them, though these had most often been recommended by colleagues. There seemed to be space for some more systematic guide to the field, to what might be worth reading. Our feeling that a different approach might prove valuable was reinforced in a conversation with Professor Brian Caldwell, who reminded us that the last thing the practitioner community needed was "another essay on leadership...".

Consequently, we opted for a more difficult project. An attempt to produce a descriptive overview of key sources that might serve a number of purposes. Accordingly, this review examines the content and recommendations of a selection of key texts, from both the educational and the non-educational literature, in order to consider their relevance to those who take on leadership tasks in schools. In particular, it seeks to provide:

- an introduction to the reviews that summarises themes and issues that will be helpful to both practitioners seeking to engage with writings about leadership, and to NCSL in its ongoing development of support for school leaders
- a systematic and critical analysis of significant literature that provides useful ideas about leadership and management relevant to schools, and
- concise summaries of key texts, that will be accessible and relevant to practitioners

In seeking to identify texts for inclusion, we were confronted by a difficult selection task. We realised that criteria would be needed to narrow down the list, but also that any set of criteria would be, to some degree, partial – a reflection of our own knowledge, experience and preferences. However, because choices had to be made, criteria were identified. These related principally to originality of thinking and usefulness of ideas (theoretical relevance), comprehensiveness of reviews and quality of empirical evidence used to support conclusions and recommendations (methodological soundness) and quality and detail of the expositions of practice (practical usefulness). Many of the texts selected match all these criteria, some only one, but these texts are included because we felt that each criterion, individually, ensures a certain relevance to the working lives of school leaders.

Finally, we are indebted to a group of headteacher associates, who spent some time with us at the National College engaging with our ideas, commenting on our drafts, offering suggestions about how we might present this review so that it might be useful to those in schools seeking to find out more about leadership theory and practice. Their advice was much appreciated; any shortcomings that remain are our own.

## Using ideas from the literature to move leadership practice forward

In this initial essay we set out the context for our review of relevant literature by addressing a series of key questions. These are:

- what kinds of school leadership are needed?
- what does the mainstream literature suggest about leadership?
- what is it that school leaders do?
- how can ideas from the literature be used to develop practice?

We then provide a brief explanation as to how the reviews are presented.

### What kinds of school leadership are needed?

The issue of school leadership has come under increasing scrutiny in recent years. Here in England, where leadership is seen as a key component in the implementation of the national reform agenda, the establishment of NCSL has given particular impetus to the search for leadership models and practices that impact on school performance. Among a range of activities, projects and publications designed to promote the study and practice of leadership that NCSL has contributed, is the report of a think tank set up to review international developments in thinking and practice relating to educational leadership (Leadership Development Framework). Drawing on experience from around the world, the report articulates a set of parameters for what it describes as “leadership for transformation”. Insofar as this report benefited from the deliberations of several of the key figures in international research into and writing about school leadership, it represents a considered view. This seems to us a useful starting point for anyone wishing to read about contemporary conceptions of the school leader’s role.

The Leadership Development Framework sets out nine propositions (a tenth relates to the College’s role in promoting these) about the leadership qualities needed to transform our schools, as follows.

- **School leadership must be purposeful, inclusive and values driven**

This implies

A commitment to equity, empowerment and higher standards of learning and achievement as the moral purpose of education.

An impetus for transforming the school as learning community for students and teachers, adequate to the expectations of a knowledge society and economy.

- **School leadership must embrace the distinctive and inclusive context of the school**

Basing school leadership on the distinctive and inclusive context of the school implies that:

School leadership must embrace the context of the school in all its complexity as a first step to utilising proven practices from elsewhere.

The particular mix of skills of school leadership will differ, often dramatically, from context to context.

- **School leadership must promote an active view of learning**

This implies that:

School leaders regard the design, management and monitoring of settings for active learning as their key task.

School leaders create the conditions and provide the support to enable teachers to improve student learning, encouraging the creation and dissemination of professional knowledge of learning strategies (including e learning) that work in classrooms and schools.

- **School leadership must be instructionally focused**

The focus on instructional leadership is not exclusive of a range of other leadership skills. It implies a general orientation towards teaching and learning rather than an exclusive approach.

Basing school leadership on a concept of instructional leadership implies that:

School leaders are expert in designing, managing and monitoring the instructional process.

School leaders are also skilful in the organisational, strategic, instructional, personal and interpersonal domains.

- **School leadership is a function that needs to be distributed throughout the school community**

Regarding school leadership as a distributed function implies that:

School leadership is an activity that is spread across the school community.

Schools that wish to constantly evolve will need to harness their human and social capital that is their richest potential, creating and sharing the leadership opportunities that provide the capacity to achieve this.

- **School leadership must build capacity by developing the school as a learning community**

Basing school leadership on building school capacity for developing the school as a professional learning community implies:

School leaders understand the concept of capacity and its constituent elements.

School leaders can lead and manage the transformation of the school culture.

- **School leadership must be futures oriented and strategically driven**

The implications for school leadership:

A realisation that educational change is complex, non-linear, frequently arbitrary, and often characterised by unpredictable shifts and fragmented initiatives.

School leaders can lead the school as an organisation through balancing development and maintenance in the context of both improvement and transformation.

- **School leadership must be developed through experiential and innovative methodologies**

This implies:

An increasing emphasis on an applied knowledge base, on problem framing and solving, with an on-the-job or field based focus, often involving team learning, and a responsiveness to need and stage of development.

The most valued expertise about school leadership will increasingly be the leaders of the profession itself so by promoting shared learning and innovation and creativity.

- **School leadership must be served by a support and policy context that is coherent, systemic and implementation driven**

This implies:

That policy-makers continually keep the 'big picture' in mind in searching for connections and ways of exploiting potential synergy.

A competence in using external support (rather than being used by it) together with a facility in creating and exploiting networks.

(Hopkins, 2001)

These propositions begin to delineate the complex expectations on and responsibilities of school leaders. However, in seeking to bring together relevant sources, we have looked beyond what might be termed educational literature, and also dipped into the mainstream writings about leadership in non-educational settings. We have done this for two reasons. First, because much (though not all) of what appears in the educational literature seems to have been drawn from the mainstream and is essentially 'interpreted' into educational contexts. The ideas will not therefore seem alien. Secondly, bearing in mind that we are seeking to draw attention to literature as a source of ideas that can be used to develop thinking and practice, we believe that there is value in looking at how leadership is conceived of and written about in more general contexts. We feel that the role of 'reading' in leadership development is more to do with stimulating individual ideas than providing recipes or solutions (see below). We also feel that there is much in common between the two literatures, as well as some important differences in emphasis. In an attempt to illustrate this, we set out below what might be considered a 'summary' of the current state of thinking from mainstream management sources..

## What does the mainstream literature suggest about leadership?

Drawing on Yukl (2002), whose work offers probably the most carefully compiled and best evidenced exposition of the available theories and models, we note a range of functions that recur throughout the writings on organisational leadership. All of these are functions (some) leaders carry out for which there is strong empirical evidence of efficacy. Though they do not, in themselves, constitute a theory of leadership, they do seem to us to list key functions of leaders and to have clear relevance for educational settings.

The functions are as follows:

- **Leaders help interpret the meaning of events.** Yukl underlines that helping people to find meaning in complex events is an increasingly important aspect of the leadership role. The accelerating pace of social and organisational change is disorientating and frequently de-skilling. Effective leaders help people come to terms with this complexity, to interpret events and to understand the implications for their own work and development.
- **Leaders build agreement around objectives and strategies.** Interdependence is a dominating characteristic of organisational life and, consequently, performance. Agreement about 'what to do and how to do it' is therefore vital, but cannot be imposed. Effective leaders are able to generate agreement about objectives and strategies and build a consensus around priorities.
- **Leaders build task commitment and optimism.** Consistent performance requires persistence and confidence when problems and obstacles are encountered. Effective leaders build enthusiasm and commitment to accomplish task goals, and develop the momentum and self-belief of work groups.
- **Leaders develop mutual trust and co-operation.** Yukl notes that, "Effective performance of a collective task requires co-operation and mutual trust". Mutual trust develops amongst people who are able to understand one another's views, accept diversity and manage differences. Consequently, effective leaders encourage co-operation and mutual trust while celebrating diversity.
- **Leaders strengthen collective identity.** Most successful organisations seem to develop a sense of collective identity – what social psychologists have described as a "we feeling". Yukl points out that, as organisations become more fluid, arrangements where boundaries are less clear and loyalties may be divided, the promotion of a 'unique identity' may be more difficult. Nevertheless, effective leaders do project a positive collective identity, and, with it, a parallel sense of the value of 'membership'.
- **Leaders organise and co-ordinate activities.** Yukl observes that the successful performance of complex tasks requires the co-ordination of many different, but interrelated, activities in ways that make efficient use of people and resources. Effective leaders help people to organise their efforts and activities, and develop strategies to co-ordinate these activities within and across tasks.
- **Leaders encourage and facilitate collective learning.** Modern organisations function in increasingly competitive and turbulent environments. To survive and prosper in such environments requires continuous learning and adaptation. Effective leaders recognise that individual learning, while necessary, is not sufficient. Consequently, they deliberately set out to encourage collective learning, shared experiences, the pooling of knowledge and skills.

- **Leaders obtain necessary resources and support.** Successful organisations are able to interact with their environments in ways that attract the necessary resources, people, permissions and support from outside. Such exchanges offer a key to sustained performance. Effective leaders promote and defend organisational boundaries, securing the resources and support needed to pursue organisational goals.
- **Leaders develop and empower people.** Organisations need to draw on the knowledge, experience, problem-solving and decision-making skills of all members. A structure and climate that encourages active involvement from all, increases the organisation's capacity to respond to current problems and opportunities while simultaneously developing its future capacity. Effective leaders draw others into leadership patterns and processes, empowering them within current roles and developing them for future roles.
- **Leaders promote social justice and morality.** Satisfaction and commitment in organisations are fuelled by a wider climate of fairness and equity. Yukl suggests that the creation of such a climate involves active efforts to protect individual rights, encourage responsibility and oppose unethical practices. Effective leaders make these efforts, modeling in their own behaviour and transactions the values they seek to promote within the organisation.

The similarities between these so-called key functions and the propositions developed by the NCSL think tank are striking. Even in areas where we might not expect it, such as the explicit commitment to social justice and equity that is evident within Yukl's mainstream perspective, we find considerable overlap. At the same time, there are some important differences. The emphasis, for example, on instructional leadership, which implies a level of understanding of the detail of the school's (organisation's) activities which does not seem to find a direct parallel in the mainstream formulation.

It is not our intention here to debate the particular merits of one source or the other; rather we hope to illustrate our view that both sources have a role to play in developing the thinking of educational practitioners. We need, therefore, to say a little about how we feel 'reading' feeds into the development of thinking and practice.



## What is it that school leaders do?

Recent years have seen something of a swing away from the vocabulary of management, towards an emphasis on notions of leadership, although the exact implications of this distinction remain somewhat confused in the field. In our view, **management** can be defined broadly as *the process of getting things done through people*, whilst **leadership** is essentially about *influencing a group of people towards a common goal*. Of course, these conceptualisations are interconnected and overlapping in a number of ways, and this is apparent in much of the literature that is reviewed in this report. Nevertheless, there is a marked preference amongst educational sources for the vocabulary of leadership. Accordingly, we have followed the inclusive definition of leadership embraced by the majority of recent educational writers – and, indeed, NCSL – that either accommodates management within leadership or subjugates it to the leadership function.

The aim, then, is to remain focused on ideas about leadership roles and strategies that will be of direct relevance to practitioners in the field and that will be of value to those involved in leadership development activities. In this sense we are concerned with what headteachers and other senior staff in schools must do in order to move their institutions forward. With this in mind we have used as our guide a series of issues that, in our experience, represent important challenges currently being faced by school leaders in England. These are to do with forms of leadership that can:

- influence values, beliefs and norms within a school
- foster practices that respond positively to pupil diversity
- create purposeful links with local communities, particularly in economically poor contexts
- lead to sustainable school improvement

The review focuses on writings produced during the past 15 years. However, even in this relatively short period there have been a large number of contributions – especially those relating to education. Though there are many similarities within the variety of theories and approaches available, there are also many differences, both in substance and in emphasis. There also seems to be rather too much attention paid to theoretical complexities and differences, and too little focused on what it is leaders actually do, day by day, that impacts on staff and pupil attitudes, behaviours and performance. Our feeling is that while the development and testing of theory is a vital prerequisite to the design of a leadership curriculum, training for leadership is most likely to be successful when it is practical in emphasis and gives clear and usable advice that can guide actions.

## How can ideas from the literature be used to develop practice?

The team that carried out this review was conscious of the need to be clear about the possible contributions that literature might make to the development of practice in the field. With this in mind, an initial draft was used as the basis of a seminar with a group of headteachers. The participants were asked to comment on the content and format of the review, focusing in particular on its relevance and accessibility. They also explored the possible roles that ideas from literature could fulfil in supporting the development of leadership practice. This led their discussions onto the question of how leaders develop their ways of working.

It was concluded that the development of leadership practice starts from personal experience and involves forms of social learning, as those within a given workplace explore ways of solving the practical problems they face as they carry out their duties. Unfortunately, much of this learning goes on at a largely intuitive level and the knowledge that it creates is mainly unarticulated. In other words, those who develop leadership skills find it difficult to describe the ways in which they do what they do!

In making sense of what is involved, it is useful here to consider the notion of communities of practice, as developed by Etienne Wenger (1998), focusing specifically on the way he sees learning as a characteristic of practice. Although the words 'community' and 'practice' evoke common images, Wenger has particular definitions of these terms, giving the phrase 'community of practice' a distinctive meaning. A practice, for example, need not be framed as the work and skill of a particular practitioner. Rather, a practice consists of those things that individuals in a community do, drawing on available resources, to further a set of shared goals. This goes beyond how practitioners complete their tasks, to include, for example, how they make it through the day, commiserating about the pressures and constraints within which they have to operate.

Wenger provides a framework that can be used to analyse learning in social contexts. At the centre of this framework is the concept of a 'community of practice', a social group engaged in the sustained pursuit of a shared enterprise. Practices are ways of negotiating meaning through social action. In Wenger's view, meaning arises from two complementary processes, 'participation' and 'reification'. He notes:

Practices evolve as shared histories of learning. History in this sense is neither merely a personal or collective experience, nor just a set of enduring artefacts and institutions, but a combination of participation and reification over time.

Participation consists of the shared experiences and negotiations that result from social interaction within a purposive community. Participation is thus inherently local, since shared experiences and negotiation processes will differ from one setting to the next, regardless of their interconnections. So, for example, within schools we see how hours of meetings, shared experiences and informal discussions over hurriedly taken lunches, also involve the development of particular meanings of frequently used phrases, such as 'raising standards' and 'school improvement'. These shared meanings help to define a teacher's experience of being a teacher, and, indeed, a leader's view of what his/her work is about. In the same way we can assume that groups of colleagues doing similar work in another school have their own, shared histories that give meaning to being a practitioner in that particular context.

Reification is the process by which communities of practice produce concrete representations of their practices, such as tools, symbols, rules and documents (and even concepts and theories). So, for example, documents such as the school development plan or a behaviour policy, are reifications of the practices within a school. They include representations of the activities in which teachers engage, and some illustrations of the conditions and problems that a teacher

might encounter in practice. At the same time, it is important to remember that such documents often provide overly rationalised portrayals of ideal practice in which the challenges and uncertainties of unfolding action are smoothed over in the telling (Brown and Duguid, 1991)

Wenger argues that learning within a given community can often be best explained within the intertwining of reification and participation. He suggests that these are complementary processes, in that each has the capacity to repair the ambiguity of meaning the other can engender. So, for example, a particular strategy may be developed as part of a school's planning activities and summarised in a set of guidance for action, providing a codified reification of intended practice. However, the meaning and practical implications of the strategy only becomes clear as it is tried in the field and discussed between colleagues. In this way, participation results in social learning that could not be produced solely by reification alone. At the same time, the reified products, such as policy documents, serve as a kind of memory of practice, cementing in place the new learning.

Wenger offers some helpful guidelines for judging whether a particular social collectivity should be considered a community of practice. Since such a community involves mutual engagement, a negotiated enterprise, and a repertoire of resources and practices, then we should expect members to:

- interact more intensively with, and know more about, others in the community than those outside the community
- hold their actions accountable (and be willing for others in the community to hold them accountable) more to the community's joint enterprise than to some other enterprise
- be more able to evaluate the actions of other members of the community than the actions of those outside the community, and
- draw on locally produced resources and artifacts to negotiate meaning more so than resources and artifacts that are imported from outside the group.

By these criteria, the leadership teams in many schools can be seen as communities of practice. They may share common aims with colleagues engaged in related work in other schools. However, Wenger's conceptualisation is a reminder that much of the learning that has led to their particular practice is grounded in their shared experiences.

Such an analysis seems to provide a way of describing the social processes that influence the development of leadership practice within a given context. At this stage in our argument, however, it is important to stress that we are not suggesting that communities of practice are in themselves a panacea for the development of effective school leaders. Rather, the concept helps us to attend to and make sense of the significance of social processes of learning, as powerful mediators of meaning. Wenger notes:

Communities of practice are not intrinsically beneficial or harmful... Yet they are a force to be reckoned with, for better or for worse. As a locus of engagement in action, interpersonal relationships, shared knowledge, and negotiation of enterprises, such communities hold the key to real transformation - the kind that has real effect on people's lives... The influence of other forces (eg the control of an institution or the authority of an individual) are no less important, but... they are mediated by the communities in which their meanings are negotiated in practice.

In thinking about of role of ideas from appropriate literature can play in the development of leadership practice, therefore, we see the need to take account of these social processes. In particular, we presume that such development requires the creation of a common through which colleagues can talk to one another and, indeed, to themselves about detailed aspects of their practice (Huberman, 1993; Little and McLaughlin, 1993). It seems that without such a language

practitioners find it very difficult to experiment with new possibilities. It has been noted, for example, that when researchers report to teachers what has been observed during their lessons, they will often express surprise (Ainscow, 1999). It seems that much of what school staff do during the intensive encounters that occur in a typical working day is carried out at an automatic, intuitive level, involving the use of tacit knowledge. Furthermore there is little time to stop and think. This is, perhaps, why having the opportunity to see colleagues at work is so crucial to the success of attempts to develop practice. It is through such shared experiences that colleagues can help one another to articulate what they currently do and define what they might like to do. It is also the means whereby taken-for-granted assumptions can be subjected to mutual critique.

It can be argued, therefore, that the most effective form of leadership development are likely to be based within the workplace, using social learning processes that will influence thinking within the communities of practice that exist. This being the case, we can see how various forms of literature could be of value in respect to these processes. In particular, ideas from literature can be used to:

- **stimulate reflection**, by enabling the reader to compare what they do with accounts of leadership practice elsewhere
- **challenge and reframe existing thinking**, by reading evidence about leadership practices that have proved to be successful in other contexts, and
- **conceptualise learning**, through engagement with texts that provide deeper theoretical explanations of what is involved in leadership practice

The three development processes throw light on how ideas from the literature may be helpful in constructing the different types of knowledge that are relevant to the development of leadership practice in schools. Consequently, in considering the various texts that are reviewed in this report, we encourage readers to keep these three possibilities in mind as they focus on their own needs as practitioners and learners.

Clearly, some of the texts we review offer accounts from elsewhere that can be used to make the familiar unfamiliar (for example, the case studies of Canadian schools provided by Leithwood and his colleagues; or, the accounts of practice in England that are presented by Day and his team). In this way the reader is provided with vicarious experiences of practice in other contexts that encourage a reconsideration of existing ways of working, perhaps drawing attention to overlooked possibilities for moving their own practice forward.

Other texts go further, in that they challenge existing practices in ways that may feel irritating or uncomfortable for the reader (for example, the constructivist approaches presented by Lambert and her colleagues; or, focusing on contexts outside of education, Denton's analysis of organisational learning and leadership). Often the benefits of reading such material are most likely achieved through discussions with colleagues who have engaged with the same text.

Finally, some texts operate at a deeper, theoretical level, which may initially seem rather difficult or even irrelevant (for example, the explanations of transactional and transformational leadership provided by Bass; or the notion of the co-operative school developed by Johnson and Johnson). Once again, our experience suggests that discussion of such texts with colleagues is often the most effective means of using complex formulations to re-conceptualise existing knowledge and clarify new understandings.

## How are the reviews framed?

Bearing this analysis in mind, the texts that were selected for review include accounts written by or about practitioners, empirical studies and theoretical contributions. All of them are written in English and many are from North America. This emphasis reflects the relative narrowness of the literature that has emanated from this country. Each review indicates the status of the text (theoretical, empirical or practitioner account) and also its provenance (educational or non-educational). It then provides a brief summary of the content of the text, focusing specifically on key ideas, themes or arguments, and gives some indication of possible implications for or applications to school contexts.

In analysing any literature on leadership practice it is, in our view, essential to pay attention to the importance of context. Leadership takes different forms in different places, not least because of the way it reflects local history, culture and, indeed, legislation. For example, much of the literature on educational leadership focuses on the work of headteachers in a way that implies that such persons carry out similar roles in schools throughout the world. It is essential to understand, however, that the roles, the status and the authority of headteachers varies considerably from country to country. So, for example, whilst in Portugal they are elected for two year periods of office by their staff colleagues and often have little authority to bring about changes in policy, in England they have considerable status and space for discretion, albeit within the constraints of national policies.

In carrying out this review, therefore, we have tried to avoid the danger of assuming that findings and ideas can be combined across cultures. Rather we treat each source individually, seeking to make clear something, at least, of the context from which it emerges. For us, the power of this process is that it enables comparisons and contrasts to be made, in ways that can be used by readers to reflect upon their own thinking and practice, not least by making the familiar unfamiliar.

In summary, then, many sources have been looked at. We have been keen to ensure that influential writings on leadership from mainstream management sources were included. We have also tried to bring together sources from education that explore leadership from as wide a range of perspectives as we could find. However, the limitations of space have meant that not all sources looked at could be included. The decision to focus on around thirty key publications, in about a three to one ratio of educational to non-educational sources, imposed certain constraints. Inevitably, this means that some sources are omitted that others may have included, some are included that others may have omitted. We apologise in advance to readers who do not find their own personal favourites here, but hope that they will find the stimulus to seek out something included that they may not previously have known about.

## References

- Ainscow, M, 1999, *Understanding the Development of Inclusive Schools*, London, Falmer
- Brown, J S and Duguid, P, 1991, Organizational learning and communities of practice: Towards a unified view of working, learning and innovation, *Organizational Science*, 2(1), 40–57
- Huberman, M, 1993, The model of the independent artisan in teachers' professional relationships. In J W Little and M W McLaughlin (eds), *Teachers' Work: Individuals, Colleagues and Contexts*. New York: Teachers College Press
- Hopkins, D, 2001, Think Tank Report to the Governing Council, Nottingham, NCSL
- Little, J W and McLaughlin, M W (eds), 1993, *Teachers' Work: Individuals, Colleagues and Contexts*, New York, Teachers College Press
- Wenger, E, 1998, *Communities of Practice: Learning, Meaning and Identity*, New York, Cambridge University Press
- Yukl, G, 2002, *Leadership in Organizations*, 5<sup>th</sup> edn, Upper Saddle River, NJ, Prentice-Hall